

## **FOX RANGE WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA - 75,404 acres**

The Fox Range WSA (NV-020-014) is located in central Washoe County, approximately 10 miles south of Gerlach, Nevada. Reno, Nevada is within 2 hours driving time of the study area and Sacramento, California is 4 hours driving time away. The WSA includes 75,404 acres of public land and surrounds 400 acres of private land. The northern and western boundary consists of a combination of roads and the Western Pacific Railroads; the southern boundary abuts a road and the Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation; and the eastern boundary is composed of roads, a powerline and private lands.

The Fox Mountain WSA is approximately 20 miles long in a north-south direction and 2 to 9 miles across in an east-west direction. It straddles the north end of the Fox Mountain Range, a typical range of the Basin and Range Geomorphic Province. Elevations range from 3,900 feet to 7,608 feet. The Smoke Creek Desert lies to the west and the San Emidio Desert to the east. Both of these deserts are represented on the fringe of the WSA.

There are three distinct landforms: the highly dissected rugged terrain of steep canyons and prominent ridges to the west, the smoother rolling hills and the desert piedmont located on both the east and west fringes of the WSA. There is some riparian vegetation as well as barren ridges and sand dunes.

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE**

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 75,404 acres for uses other than wilderness. In this WSA, the mineral potential outweighs the wilderness resources. Nine thousand eight hundred acres have high metallic mineral potential and 25,600 acres have moderate metallic mineral potential. There are 14,000 acres with high geothermal potential and 11,800 acres with moderate potential. There would also be manageability problems associated with the 2,767 acres (3% of WSA) of oil and gas leases and the 2,100 acres of preFLPMA mining claims. The claim holders and the possessors of the leases would have the right to develop their prospects.

It is projected that a 320 acre (100 acres in WSA) open pit precious metal mine is likely to be developed as well as two 10-acre underground precious metals mines. There would be 3 1/2 miles of access roads, waste dumps and staging areas associated with the mines. Development of these operations would severely reduce the wilderness characteristics of the study area.

Potential development of the 400 acres of private lands would affect an area greater than the actual disturbance. Development of these lands would greatly diminish the values of naturalness and solitude in other parts of the study area. Since the BLM is required to provide reasonable access to inholding owners, construction of access roads through the area would create an additional erosion of wilderness values.

In summary, the mineral potential, combined with the manageability difficulties, outweigh the wilderness values in this WSA.

### **3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS**

**A. Naturalness:** The WSA is predominantly natural. The west side of the Fox Range is a highly dissected, rugged landform of steep canyons and prominent ridges. There is an abrupt transition from the desert piedmont on the west to the range itself. A large bowl-like basin, Juniper Flat, is located near the ridge crest.

The east side of the range is a smoother, more rolling landform, The terrain alternates between narrow,

confined drainages and more open drainages with several major canyons present. The steep portions of this section become gently sloping to the east where the land blends gradually into the San Emidio Desert. There is a small area of granitic outcrops and remnant boulders just east of Pah Rum Peak. The fringing desert piedmont is a transition area between the Fox Range and the Smoke Creek Desert to the west and the San Emidio Desert to the east. It is a typical alluvial landscape with gentle slopes and shallow parallel washes. This section contains several small sand dune areas, most notably along the northern tip.

The one grazing allotment has several range improvements - six developed springs, two corrals, two study plots, one reservoir and one fence (1.5 miles long). There are also three roads (8.5 miles) and seventeen ways (18.4 miles). A portion of the northeast boundary is formed by a powerline and a road which are visible from adjacent areas in the unit. The Western Pacific Railroad along the northern and western boundary is both visible and audible from adjacent areas in the WSA. Overall, the impact of these and other features is slight because of the large size of this WSA.

**B. Solitude:** The WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. On the west side of the range, low shrubs and scattered juniper offer fair to poor vegetative screening, but the highly dissected drainages offer excellent topographic screening. The east side is similar to the west with the low shrubs and scattered juniper offering fair to poor vegetative screening with fair topographic screening in rolling hill country and some good locations in deeper cut drainages. The fringing desert piedmont offers poor screening both from vegetation and topography because of the low shrubs and generally flat terrain. There is light, periodic travel both on the boundary roads and interior roads and ways. The Western Pacific Railroad is visible and audible from portions of the WSA on the north and west sides. Military aircraft fly over occasionally but the WSA is of a sufficient size to provide solitude and secluded spots are easily found within the unit.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The area contains recreation opportunities similar to the other mountain ranges in the region. There are no particularly unusual recreation draws, attractions or desirable destinations within the study area. There are opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation such as day-hiking, camping, backpacking, hunting, horse-packing, rock climbing and scrambling, and nature study. History enthusiasts are interested in the fact that part of John C. Fremont's 1842-1843 route, with Kit Carson as guide, followed the eastern edge of the WSA, but no trace of his passage still exists. The WSA is in the Fox and Lake Ranges Wild Horse Herd Use Areas. There is potential for a fishery in Wild Horse Canyon, although none presently exist.

**D. Special Features:** The history associated with Fremont's 1842-1843 route is a special feature of this area. It is also within the viewshed of the Noble's Route of the Immigrant Trail.

#### **4. MANAGEABILITY**

The study area is capable of being managed as wilderness but there will be some manageability concerns. One percent of the WSA (867 acres) is under geothermal leases; three percent of the area (2,267 acres) is under oil and gas leases; there is an additional three percent of the WSA with preFLPMA mining claims (2,100 acres); and there are 400 acres of private inholdings. If any of these parcels are developed, as the owners/possessors have the legal right to do, intrusions created by mining or drilling operations would seriously and adversely impact the wilderness values present. Access to allow the owners/possessors to reach these parcels would also have to be granted. This would involve new roads scarring up the countryside and the additional noise and dust caused by vehicles working in the area.

A management concern is the fact that 13,000 acres (17% of WSA) are accessible to off-road vehicles .

## **5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES**

The following conclusions were reached regarding this study area: 9,800 acres rated high for metallic mineral potential (antimony, lead, zinc, copper, nickel, mercury, molybdenum, gold and silver), 25,600 acres rated moderate for metallic mineral potential (same as above with the exception of lead), 14,000 acres rated high for geothermal potential and 11,800 acres with moderate geothermal potential. Portions of the Cottonwood Mining District and the Wild Horse Mine occur in cherrystem areas in the heart of the WSA. The mines in these areas have been past producers of gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc and antimony. This WSA has been nominated as an "Area of Critical Mineral Potential" by Exxon Minerals Company.

There are 2,100 acres of mining claims, 867 acres of geothermal leases and 2,267 acres of oil and gas leases in the WSA. There is no present production of any mineral or geothermal resource in the study area.

It is projected that a 320 acre (100 acres in WSA) open pit precious metal mine is likely to be developed as well as two 10 acre underground precious metals mines if the area were not to be designated as wilderness. There would be 3 1/2 miles of access roads, waste dumps and staging areas associated with the mines.

In summary, quantities of various mineral or geothermal resources are unknown, but the potential for occurrence is from moderate to high in several portions of the WSA.

## **6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC COMMENTS**

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980), many of the 16 comments addressed characteristics of the area (e.g., intrusions, resources, wilderness qualities) or suggested boundary changes. Reasons given for supporting WSA status were naturalness and opportunities for solitude and recreation. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status included other resource values, roads and intrusions.

These comments addressed the entire 100,000 acres which became the Fox Range and the Pole Creek WSAs. About 12,000 acres of the original study area have since been released from wilderness consideration.

During the 90-day comment period for the Draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement, three formal public meetings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3, and Reno on November 8, 1983). During this period, 72 comments were received; six of them were oral and 66 were written. All of the oral comments supported more wilderness than what was recommended in the draft EIS (no wilderness). Of the 66 written comments, 56 of them recommended more wilderness than that recommended in the draft EIS and 10 agreed with the proposed action (no wilderness). The subject of comments were the intrusions, such as fences, roads and private property, as well as the area's low wilderness quality. Other people said that the canyons were impressive and that the WSA's closeness to Reno should be considered.

The Governor of the State of Nevada concurred with The Bureau's recommendation. No comments about wilderness were received from Washoe County agencies or officials. The U.S. Air Force supports wilderness designation provided no restrictions are placed on military flights. It has promised to work with the BLM if military flights create problems in some areas.

No comments have been received on the Final Environmental Impact Statement.